

**KROPOTKIN**  
**The Man and**  
**His Message.**  
**By Tom Swan.**

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# KROPOTKIN :

## The Man and his Message.

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BY TOM SWAN.

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OF late years Russia has loomed large and ominous in the eyes of the civilised world ; and yet, to most men, the Empire of the Czar is shrouded in mystery. No one unacquainted with the country, the social and economic conditions of its people, and the inner working of the revolutionary movement, can form any conception of the struggle that has been going on for years between the supporters of autocratic government on the one hand and its enemies on the other. Such reports as do see the light in the press of Europe are frequently conflicting, and nearly always unreliable. One fact alone is clearly recognised—that the representatives of the Czar have for ages been systematically exploiting the peasants, grinding them to the earth by excessive taxation, punishing all who showed signs of resent-

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ment, and endeavouring to stamp out all independence and public spirit from the hearts and the minds of the upper classes. To rule with absolute power, to exact implicit obedience, to silence every sound of discontent, to stifle every breath of criticism, has been the policy of the Russian Government. As a result of this policy, we see a great nation—great in point of population, of territory, of natural resources, and of national characteristics—subjected to insults and humiliations almost without parallel in the history of the world. Lord Byron's description of Rome as "the Niobe of nations" is more true of Russia to-day than ever it was of Rome.

"There are," says Dr. Georg Brandes, "at this moment only two great Russians who think for the Russian people, and whose thoughts belong to mankind—Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin." Just as Tolstoy is universally recognised as one of the greatest of living literary artists, so Kropotkin is acknowledged to be one of the greatest of living scientists. His fame as a geographer, geologist, biologist, and sociologist is world-wide.

Peter Kropotkin belongs by birth to the

highest aristocracy of Russia. He was educated at the College of Pages, a school to which only the sons of the nobles are admitted. In early manhood he went to Siberia and China in quest of scientific knowledge. He came back a distinguished man of science, having made discoveries of the utmost importance. Honour, position, and all that wealth and fame could bestow might have been his; these he rejected, and became a Nihilist. While organising the forces of revolt he was arrested and immured for three years in the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. His escape from prison is one of the most thrilling episodes in the whole history of the Nihilist movement. Henceforth his life was to be one continual fight against oppression. But "he has never been an avenger, always a martyr. He does not impose sacrifices upon others; he makes them himself. All his life he has done it, but in such a way that the sacrifice seems to have cost him nothing, so little does he make of it. And with all his energy, he is never vindictive. This man is simplicity personified. In character, he will bear comparison with any of the fighters for freedom in all lands. None has been more

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disinterested than he ; none has loved mankind more than he does."

Of Kropotkin's renunciation of rank and wealth, of his heroic and incessant labours on behalf of the common people, of his devotion to the cause of humanity, little need be said. Thousands of his fellow-countrymen and women have equalled him in this respect. The truth of this Kropotkin would be the first to admit ; but of his scientific and intellectual achievements it would be difficult to say too much. Certain of his books are amongst the most valuable contributions to modern literature.

The key to the whole of Kropotkin's teachings is to be found in his "Mutual Aid," a volume of essays reprinted from the *Nineteenth Century*. Prior to their publication, and owing to a misunderstanding of the Darwinian theory of evolution, it had become customary to speak of Nature as though her annals were written entirely in blood, as though her story was one long record of rapine and slaughter. The maxim, "each for himself," etc., was regarded as capable of universal application. The late Professor Huxley, for instance, asserts, in his "Struggle for Existence, and its Bearing on Man," that

among animals, and also among primitive men, "the Hobbesian war of each against all is the normal state of existence." The assumption that individual competition is the greatest factor in progress is found on examination, however, to be quite baseless, and is not even in harmony with Darwin's teachings.

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It is not, as Kropotkin points out, the "red in tooth and claw" qualities which are developed by individual struggle, but rather the elimination of competition, the practice of mutual aid, that has rendered evolution possible.

It was with the object of demonstrating this fact, and thus interpreting the Darwinian theory in a truly scientific spirit, that Kropotkin was prompted to write these essays. That they answered their purpose is beyond dispute. In 1888, Professor Huxley stated clearly that he regarded the struggle for existence as one between individuals of the same species. By 1894, four years after the publication of Kropotkin's first essay on the subject, Huxley had modified his opinion, and "pleads guilty" to having used the term struggle for existence "too loosely." He even admits that social organisations are not

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peculiar to man. "Other societies, such as constituted by bees and ants, have also arisen out of the advantage of co-operation in the struggle for existence." Nor need we be surprised to find Huxley discarding his former view and adopting that of Kropotkin. The latter uses his material in such a masterly manner, and supports his arguments with such an abundance of proof and wealth of illustrations, that the most sceptical must be convinced.

In order to accomplish this, he ransacks every branch of biology and sociology for evidence of the sociability of man, and of the other animals. He cites passages illustrative of this from the works of almost every biologist and naturalist of note. He draws our attention to the social habits of almost every species of animal that have come under the observation of man. He also describes in detail the social customs of savage races, of races mid-way between savagery and civilisation, of the Middle Ages, and shows how sociability is ever finding new modes of expression at the present time. And this in spite of the many attempts on the part of Governments to prevent the people from co-operating for common ends; and yet, despite



all State opposition, among ourselves there is an ever-present tendency to restrict competition, and to substitute concerted action for individual struggle. This is also true, to a great extent, of animals and men in every age and in every clime. At every stage of their evolution we find them interdependent, and at no stage do we find evidence of the "Hobbesian war of each against all." The general conclusion at which Kropotkin arrives is well expressed by him when he says:—

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"Life in society enables the feeblest insect, bird, and mammal to resist or to protect themselves against the most terrible birds and beasts of prey; it permits longevity; it enables the species to rear up its young with the least amount of energy; and to maintain its numbers, albeit a very slow birth-rate; it enables the gregarious animals to migrate in search of new abodes. As to the intellectual faculty, while every Darwinian will agree with Darwin that it is the most powerful arm in the struggle for life, and the most powerful factor in further evolution, he will also admit that intelligence is a social faculty. Language, imitation, and accumulated experience are so many elements of growing intelligence of which the unsociable animals

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are deprived. The fittest are thus the most sociable animals, and sociability appears as the chief factor of evolution, both directly, by securing the well-being of the species while diminishing the waste of energy, and indirectly, by favouring the growth of intelligence."

Recognition of the foregoing truths will render it easy for us to grasp the significance of Kropotkin's ethical teachings, for sociability is not only the chief factor in physical and intellectual progress, it is also the motive force in moral evolution. The origin of the moral sentiment is to be found in the mutual needs of animals and of men, and the mutual support and protection consequent on these needs. When a man acts in response to the promptings of his conscience, when he performs a moral act, he is but following the dictates of his nature, just as the ants follow the dictates of their nature when they rush by thousands into the burning ant hills to secure their larvæ; just as monkeys follow the dictates of their nature when they besiege the tent of the hunter who has shot one of their comrades, and, heedless of their own danger, beg of him to give up the dead body.

In each case the act is the direct outcome

of the feeling of solidarity engendered and developed by life in society. "Now let us imagine this feeling acting during the millions of ages which have succeeded one another since the first beginnings of animal life appeared upon the globe. Let us imagine how this feeling, little by little, became a habit, and was transmitted from the simplest microscopic organism to its descendants—insects, birds, reptiles, mammals, man—and we shall comprehend the origin of the moral sentiment which is a necessity to animals, like food, or the organ for digesting it."

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This explanation may be too simple to suit the metaphysical or the theological mind, but it is none the less the true one. Let us consider this question a little further. In science it is an axiom that self-preservation is the first law of Nature; and since the pressure of external forces makes it impossible for any but the very strongest animals to live and multiply without combination of some kind, the less strong, in order to survive, must live in packs, flocks, or droves, in a word, society. By thus co-operating they are enabled to secure their prey and to escape their enemies, and are less liable to succumb to any dangers whatsoever. Hence

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the very conditions of life made it necessary for men and other animals to become partakers in the advantages, and sharers in the duties, of society life. Consequently natural selection—the multiplication of the social and the extinction of the anti-social—resulted, as we have seen, first in the development of intelligence, and also in the cultivation of the moral sentiment. Life in society, since the energies of the individual are not always being exerted in fighting for existence, enables the unit to accumulate a fund of energy over and above what is necessary for its own preservation.

“We have,” says Kropotkin, “more tears than our own suffering claims; more capacity for joy than our own existence can justify. The solitary being is wretched, restless, because he cannot share his thoughts and feelings with others. When we feel some great pleasure, we wish to let others know that we exist; we feel, we love, we live, we struggle, we fight. The origin of such qualities is the feeling of one’s own force. It is overflowing life which seeks to spread. To feel within oneself that one is capable of acting, is, at the same time, to become conscious of what it is one’s duty to do. All

accumulated force creates a pressure upon the obstacles placed before it. Power to act is duty to act. The moral obligation, thus stripped of all mysticism, is reduced to the conception: *the condition of the maintenance of life is its expansion.* The plant cannot prevent itself from flowering. Sometimes to flower means to die. Never mind, the sap mounts all the same. It is the same with the human being when he is full of force and energy. He expands his life. He gives without calculation, otherwise he could not live. If he must die, like the flower when it blooms, never mind, the sap rises, if sap there be." This is the morality of which Kropotkin is not only the exponent, but the very personification. "This morality will issue no commands. It will refuse once and for all to model individuals according to an abstract idea, as it will refuse to mutilate them by religion, law, or government. It will leave to the individual full and perfect liberty. It will say to man: If you feel within you the strength of youth; if you wish to live, to enjoy a perfect, full, and overflowing life; be strong, be great, be vigorous in all you do. Struggle, so that all may live this rich, overflowing life; and be

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sure that in this struggle you will find a greater joy than anything else can give."

Just as Kropotkin's sociological and ethical teachings are based upon actual fact, so are his economic theories, he affirms, the outcome of a careful analysis of all available data and close observation of the trend of events. His conclusions, and his reasons for holding these conclusions, are set forth in "Fields, Factories, and Workshops." In this book he proves that England's ideal—that of being the workshop of the world—is an impossible one; that economic development is against it. Because her foreign trade has enabled England to accumulate, as a nation, wealth; because her exports have brought her in return riches and power, many people assume that this state of things will always remain. But there is no reason behind the assumption. The reaction has, in fact, set in. "Knowledge and invention, boldness of thought and enterprise, conquests of genius and improvement have become international growths. The monopoly of industrial production could not remain with England for ever. Neither industrial knowledge nor enterprise could be kept for ever as a privilege of these islands. Necessarily, fatally, they cross the Channel,

and spread over the Continent." The effect of this is to be found in the fact that countries which once bought goods from us are now not only producing for themselves, but are actually competing with us in the markets of the world.

Economic evolution is thus not in the direction of *centralisation*, but *decentralisation* of industry. "Nations refuse to be specialised. Each nation is a compound aggregate of tastes and inclinations, of wants and resources, of capacities and inventive powers. The territory occupied by each nation is again a most varied texture of soils and climates. Variety is the distinctive feature, both of the territory and its inhabitants, and that variety implies a variety of occupations. The needs of human agglomerations correspond to the needs of the individual; and while a *temporary* division of functions remains the surest guarantee of success in each undertaking, the *permanent* division is doomed to disappear, and to be superseded by a variety of pursuits corresponding to the different capacities of the individual, as well as to the variety of capacities within each human aggregate." And countries that are now, like England,

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living on food produced abroad, will in time be forced by economic pressure to feed and clothe their own people.

“But,” it is frequently said, “England cannot do this.” Facts give the lie direct to this assertion. “If the soil of England were cultivated only as it was thirty-five years ago, 24,000,000 people could live on home-grown food. If it were cultivated as is the soil in Belgium, we could grow food for 37,000,000 inhabitants. If it were cultivated as it is at present on the best farms in this country, in Lombardy, and in Flanders, we should be able to feed 80,000,000 people.” There is, in fact, no possibility of our population outgrowing our ability to feed it. All that is necessary is the determination to do it; the means are at hand.

This would involve, of course, the reorganisation of production and of distribution. And here arises the question of methods. Politicians tell us that all the necessary changes may be brought about by and through the various elected bodies. Kropotkin does not incline to this opinion. He believes that more may be, and has been, accomplished by means of strikes, and various other forms of direct action, than can ever be gained by



sending men to Parliament. By so doing, he says, the workers perpetuate the very evils they would remove. And it is useless to look to an external power for the things they need, when they might, by free co-operation, secure all the essentials of life. Then, again, politics imply government—the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals—and progress, both economic and political, lies in the direction of decentralisation. “To each new economical phase of life corresponds a new political phase. Absolute monarchy corresponds to the system of serfdom. Representative Government corresponds to capital-rule. Both, however, are class-rule. In a society where the distinction between capitalist and labourer has disappeared, there is no need of such a Government. Free workers would require a free organisation, and this cannot have another basis than free agreement and free co-operation, without sacrificing the autonomy of the individual to the all-pervading interference of the State. The no-capitalist system implies the no-Government system. Anarchy, the no-Government system of Socialism, has a double origin. It is an outgrowth of the two great movements of thought in the economical and political

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**Kropotkin:** fields which characterise our century—  
**The Man** Socialism, the demand for economic freedom;  
**and his** and Radicalism, the demand for political  
**Message.** freedom.” With the Socialists, Kropotkin  
holds that private property in land and  
capital has nearly run its course, and that  
the means of production and distribution  
must be held collectively; and with the  
Radicals, he maintains that the ideal political  
organisation is one under which the functions  
of Government are reduced to *nil*.

An organisation under which individuals  
will have perfect liberty of initiative and  
action for satisfying, by means of free groups  
and federations, the varied needs of their  
lives. This, in brief, is the message of  
Peter Kropotkin—Scientist, Anarchist, and  
Prophet. Whether humanity will ever reach  
the goal to which he directs our thoughts or  
not, time alone can prove. But we may be  
sure of this—every real reform must be one  
step towards it. Meanwhile—“Struggle!  
To struggle is to live, and the fiercer the  
struggle, the intenser the life. Then you  
will have lived, and lived a life; and a few  
hours of such a life are worth years spent  
vegetating in the swamps of corruption.”



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